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A longtime fan's tribute to Whitey, Harry

BRODSKY BALLAD ON CD

by Stan Hockman, Philadelphia Daily News

CHUCK BRODSKY'S name is in the book, the one the mourners signed as they filed lovingly, longingly past Richie Ashburn's casket, that memorable day when 20,000 showed up to pay back Whitey for the laughter he had sprinkled through so many endless summers.

Brodsky went home to Weaverville, and he drove those North Carolina backroads in a car with the antenna yanked as high as it could go, fiddling with the radio dial 'til his fingers got calloused, listening to the crackling ache in Harry Kalas' heart as he broadcast those Phillies games without Whitey. And then Brodsky wrote a song called "Whitey and Harry" because that is what Brodsky does, write songs and sing them:

"Moonlight on the mountains, North Carolina two-lane, trying to find a ballgame, no matter how bad the reception. Whitey, man, I miss you, when I listen to the Phillies... and there's Harry going on without you. Harry...good old Harry." It's a poignant song, part of a new CD called "The Baseball Ballads," establishing Brodsky as a sincere troubadour for a game in deep trouble. (You can find out more about the album through www.chuckbrodsky.com.) Perhaps they'll play it at the ballyard the day they hand out those Whitey and Harry bobbleheads, a fitting souvenir of a partnership that lasted 27 years.

"All those years," Brodsky said, "Whitey and Harry called every Phillies game I ever listened to. Including the ones from the West Coast, the ones that didn't start 'til 11, the radio stuffed under my pillow." He'd fall asleep to Whitey kibitzing with Harry, the banter as warm and

comforting as an old blanket.

"That partnership was so strong," Brodsky recalled. "Those guys really loved each other. "Whitey was great, with those off-the-wall anecdotes, and Harry had this wonderful personality that blended in."

And now, they are both in baseball's Hall of Fame. Brodsky, sweetly enough, became the first folk singer to entertain at the Hall of Fame. Good enough to be invited back.

"The first concert was in the Bullpen Theater," he said. "Second one was in the Great Hall. It was the day tickets went on sale for the Hall of Fame game, and we had a big crowd. "There I was, singing 'Lefty,' and I was right there, near Steve Carlton's plaque. An incredible feeling."

Tim Wiles, director of research for the Hall of Fame library, booked Brodsky's appearances. It was Wiles who fielded Brodsky's call years ago seeking information about an obscure guy named Eddie Klepp. Turns out Klepp was a white dude who played in the Negro Leagues, for the Cleveland Buckeyes. Brodsky wrote "The Ballad of Eddie Klepp," which is all about the anguish of discrimination, seen from a starkly different angle.

"I bleed Phillies red," confessed Brodsky, a native of Philadelphia. "I'm probably driving the only car in the Southeast with a Phillies bumper sticker."

Which would account for the distinct Philadelphia attytood to the newest album, Brodsky's fourth. More than half the songs have a local connection, including sentimental tributes to first baseman Dick Allen ("Letters in the Dirt") and luckless Eddie Waitkus ("The Unnatural Shooting of Eddie Waitkus").

There's a lovely song about Max Patkin, the Clown Prince of Baseball, called "Gone to Heaven." Brodsky had seen Patkin perform as a kid and then caught his geyser act in the movie "Bull Durham." "He was a throwback to an earlier era, an inspiring character," Brodsky said. "I phoned him and he asked me to meet him at the Municipal Courthouse [in Philadelphia].

"At the end, that was his hobby, attending trials. Everybody knew him. We went to a double-murder trial and there was Max, selling his book to the people sitting in front of us, the people behind us.

"I gave him a tape of the song I'd written and he played the tape for every doctor, every nurse, in the hospital where he'd had his aorta replaced. As a songwriter, that means the world to me. Sadly, he passed away 2 weeks after I met him."

The sad song about "Lefty" is not truly a portrait of Carlton because it begins, "Lefty's in the minors; got his shoulder packed in ice. He's trying to hang in there against all that good advice."

"That's the one baseball song I've written that is not about an actual person," Brodsky said. "It's a composite of a few guys."

Brodsky clicks on Phillynews.com every morning to keep track of his favorite ballclub. Wishes he had something "juicy" to say about what happened to them this year, but comes up empty, like those Carolina nights without Harry's voice to console him.

"Can't hear 'em down here," he said sadly, a reference to the team's new radio home. "Hey, when I visited my folks in Glad-wyne, there were places in Philly where I couldn't hear 'em."